

AN EDUCATOR'S GUIDE TO CYBERBULLYING

Young people have fully embraced the Internet and other technologies, like cell phones, as both an environment and a tool for socializing. They send emails, create their own Web sites, post intimate personal news in blogs (online interactive diaries), send text messages and images via cell phone, message each other through IMs (instant messages), chat in chatrooms, post to discussion boards and seek out new friends in teen community sites.



Unfortunately, there are increasing reports of teens (and sometimes younger children) using these technologies to post cruel text or images to bully their peers or engage in other cruel behavior. There are also increasing reports of teens posting material that raises concerns they are considering an act of violence towards others or themselves.

This document provides information about cyberbullying for educators and other professionals who focus on youth safety and well-being.

This document is excerpted with permission from Nancy Willard, "An Educator's Guide to Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats" (Eugene: Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use, 2005.)

CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying is being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material using the Internet or a cell phone.

Here is how it happens:

Flaming

Online "fights" using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language.

Harassment

Repeatedly sending offensive, rude, and insulting messages.

Cyberstalking

Repeatedly sending messages that include threats of harm or are highly intimidating. Engaging in other online activities that make a person afraid for his or her safety.

Denigration

"Dissing" someone online. Sending or posting cruel gossip or rumors about a person to damage his or her reputation or friendships.

Impersonation

Breaking into someone's account, posing as that person and sending messages to make the person look bad, get that person in trouble or danger, or damage that person's reputation or friendships.

Outing and Trickery

Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information online. Deceiving someone into revealing secrets or embarrassing information, which is then shared online.

Exclusion

Intentionally keeping out someone from an online group, like a "buddy list" or a game.

HOW CYBERBULLYING OCCURS

Cyberbullying or cyberthreat material—text or images—may be posted on personal Web sites or blogs or transmitted via email, discussion groups, message boards, chat, IM or text/image cell phones.

A cyberbully may be a person whom the target knows or an online stranger. A cyberbully may be anonymous and may solicit involvement of other people online who do not even know the target.

Generally, teens are the most actively involved.

INSIGHT INTO CYBERBULLYING

Bullying Behavior

- Bullying involves behavior intended to harm or disturb that occurs repeatedly over time among youth with an imbalance of power.
- Cyberbullying involves repeated behavior with intent to harm and repeated nature, but online communications can change power balance providing greater opportunity for a lower status target to retaliate.

Bullying Actions

- Bullying includes actions that are physical, direct verbal and indirect relationship aggression.
- There is no physical form of cyberbullying. Direct verbal forms include flaming, harassment and cyberstalking. Indirect relationship aggression includes denigration, outing, trickery, impersonation, exclusion and also cyberstalking.

Age

- There is extensive bullying behavior in middle school, especially the first years, with decreased bullying in older grades.
- It appears that cyberbullying peaks in older grades.

Profiles

- Bully and victim profiles include aggressive bullies, social climber bullies, passive victims and bully/victims.
- Cyberbullying appears to frequently be based on social climbing interactions. Sometimes, this involves students who would not normally be perceived by school officials as bullies. Targets of bullying are retaliating online.

Gender Differences

- It is frequently stated that "boys bully more than girls." But this may be based on a failure to recognize socially harmful acts of girls as bullying. Boys engage in more physical bullying.
- It appears that girls are as active or more active than boys in cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is verbal, not physical. Girls are more involved in online communications, whereas boys are more involved in playing online games.

Hate and bias

- Bullying can be motivated by hate and bias, based on gender identity, sexual orientation, obesity, race and religion.
- Angry, disconnected youth are attracted to online hate groups or informal associations with other disaffected youth. Online games reinforce bias-based hate. Both of these factors appear to influence cyberbullying. Students who are obese or perceived to have a different sexual orientation are significant targets.

Bystanders

- Bystanders reinforce bullies and maintain social norms. Efforts to address bullying are focusing on empowering bystanders.
- There are no responsible adults in these online environments. Empowering online bystanders to disapprove, assist and/or report will be essential to addressing the concerns of cyberbullying.

Parents

- Parents of bullies have been found to demonstrate lack of involvement, no limit setting and model aggressive problem-solving.
- A frequent Internet use survey finding is that parents are not involved in their children's online activities.
- Promotion of filtering software has lead to false security and lack of parent monitoring.

Media Influences

- Some media glorifies bullying and violence and excessive personal disclosure.
- Teens can be the star of their own "reality TV" show in their personal blog or Web site by sharing personal information or slamming others. Online violence can be perceived as "just a game." Cyberbullying is a form of entertainment.

Impact

- It is widely known that face-to-face bullying can result in long-term psychological harm to targets. This harm includes low self-esteem, depression, anger, school failure, school avoidance and, in some cases, school violence or suicide.
- It is possible that the harm caused by cyberbullying may be even greater than harm caused by traditional bullying because:
 - Online communications can be extremely vicious.
 - There is no escape for those who are being cyberbullied; victimization is ongoing, 24/7.
 - Cyberbullying material can be distributed worldwide and is often irretrievable.
 - Cyberbullies can be anonymous and can solicit the involvement of unknown "friends."
 - Many teens are reluctant to tell adults what is happening online or through their cell phone because they are emotionally traumatized, think it is their fault, fear greater retribution or fear their online activities or use of a cell phone will be restricted.

ONLINE BEHAVIOR

Why is it that when people use the Internet or other technologies, they sometimes do things that they would never do in the "real world?" The answer to this question can be summed up in one statement: "You can't see me, I can't see you."

You Can't See Me

When people use the Internet, they feel like they are invisible. It is just them, the keyboard and the computer. In fact, people are not really invisible, because they are leaving little "cyberfootprints" wherever they go. The perception of invisibility is enhanced because of the ability to create anonymous accounts. When people are invisible, this removes the concerns of detection, social disapproval and punishment.

I Can't See You

When people use the Internet they do not receive tangible feedback about the consequences of their actions, including actions that have hurt someone else. The lack of tangible feedback interferes with empathy. This also leads to the perception that online actions are "just a game."

Rationalizations

Sometimes when people do something they know is wrong, they provide excuses or rationalizations for their behavior. Common rationalizations include: "He started it," "Everybody does it," "Nobody ever gets caught" and "I was just playing around." It is a lot easier to rationalize wrong behavior online because of the perception of invisibility and the lack of tangible feedback.

Role Playing

Teens engage in role-playing online, by creating different "personas" or "avatars" in different online environments. This allows them to use a new Internet rationalization: "It wasn't me, it was my 'avatar'." This reinforces the perception that all actions online are a game.

Online Social Norms

The perception of invisibility, lack of tangible feedback, the ease by which wrong behavior can be rationalized and role playing has provided the basis for online social norms that support for cyberbullying and cyberthreats. These norms include:

- "Tell all. On the Internet it is okay to reveal my personal secrets for the world to see."
- "I have a free speech right to say whatever I want about others online, without regard for the harm I might cause."
- "What happens online is just a game. It is not real. So no one can get really hurt."
- "What happens online should stay online."

RELATED ONLINE RISKY BEHAVIOR

Disclosing Personal Information

Young people are disclosing personal contact information and massive amounts of sensitive personal information in profiles, Web pages, blogs and through all forms of Internet communications. They seem to be totally unaware of the public and permanent nature of these disclosures and the ability of anyone to resend this material to anyone, anywhere in the world.

Hate Group Recruitment and Gangs

Sites and groups that foster hatred against "others" are actively recruiting angry, disconnected youth. Some youth informally use the Internet to coordinate troublesome and dangerous activities.

Violent Gaming

Violent gaming frequently involves sexual or biased-based victims. Young people often engage in online simulation games, which reinforce the perception that all interactions online, including violent ones, are "just a game."

WHY ARE EDUCATORS (AND PARENTS) OUT OF THE LOOP?

Because in too many cases educators (and parents) aren't paying attention and teens aren't talking.

- Many educators think that if their students are using a computer in the library or a computer lab at school, they are safe and not getting into trouble. Nothing could be further from the truth.
- Educators may think students are protected because the district has installed filtering software. Filtering software provides false security. Not only can students still get to the kinds of material they should not access, it cannot prevent cyberbullying. Students could be the target of emotionally damaging harassment or be causing pain to others—using school computers. This is a special concern if the school has a laptop program that allows the students to use computers from many locations, including home.
- There are strong social norms against disclosure of online concerns to any adult for fear of increased attention to online activities, restrictions and vicious retribution.

